SENIOR THESIS:
Using Marketing and Design Concepts as a Framework to Build an Effective University Athletics Page

(CONDENSED VERSION)

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Introduction

This thesis will use sports marketing and web design practices as a means to create a framework for evaluating and building an effective University Athletics webpage. The sports marketing concepts that have been identified as essential pieces for web development through research are: Brand Image, Media Use, and Fan Development. Each of these concepts can be paired with effective web design practices, to create a framework for building an effective University Athletics page that satisfies marketing and design goals. For the purposes of this thesis, the framework will be tested on the Colorado State University – Pueblo’s main Athletics page. This research is important as the marketing needs for an Athletics department can encompass a wide range of things. It must be appealing to prospective athletes, it must inform and engage fans, and it must have practical uses for current athletes. It is important that an Athletic page is utilized effectively as a marketing tool for these reasons and more. This thesis aims to ensure that the marketing needs of the Athletics program are met in a way that is effective, appealing, and cohesive.

This thesis will be using three methods of research. A bulk of the research for this thesis will be done through secondary research. This secondary research will include the examination of library research, textbooks, and other relevant documents and findings. This will be used to gather data on the identified marketing concepts and web design practices. The second method will be observation. This will be the use of the framework to evaluate the Colorado State University – Pueblo Athletics page, as well as, a few of its competitors. The third method is a survey. This survey will try and identify what group makes up the largest portion of the target market, and what might be done to better accommodate CSU-Pueblo Athletics’ target market. It will be analyzed and integrated with the rest of the market research in the making of a concept redesign of the CSU-Pueblo Athletics page.

Framework Overview

Upon reviewing the research, parallels can be seen between the web design best practices and the marketing concepts discussed. Many observations and goals between the two tend to align. When we bring these aspects together, we can form our framework for building an effective University Athletics page. The use of this framework will allow us to evaluate or build a University Athletics page through its application. While this framework could potentially be applied to other areas, it is important to note that it was built with University Athletics specifically in mind. The framework for web evaluation can be simplified into three phases:
• Phase 1: Site Architecture
  o Content: Characteristics
  o Interactivity
  o Graphics

• Phase 2: Site Organization
  o Content: Focus
  o Vividness
  o Distinctiveness

• Phase 3: Attention Model
  o Intensity Contrast, Chromatic Contrast, Size, and Position

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The Framework for Web Design is a little different than the Evaluation model. This is simply just because when designing, it is more logical for a different order of operations. The build model is as follows:

• Step 1: Content (Characteristics and Focus)
• Step 2: Interactivity
• Step 3: Vividness
• Step 4: Graphics/Distinctiveness
• Step 5: Attention Model Adjustments
Content Characteristics and Focus

Content characteristics ensures that the content meets the target audience’s needs and expectations. Most Athletics pages feature a standard assortment of content. This includes but is not limited to: sports news, schedule, social media, prospective athlete information, and ticket information. Typically, the more features a site has, the better. It is important for Fan Development that all of the target audience’s expectations are met.

Content focus pertains to how the content on the page is used. It can be easy to have all of the proper elements of a page, but to utilize them ineffectively such that marketing or design goals are not met. It is important that content is presented in a way that someone is easily able to find what they are looking for, this means segmenting content based on different audience members. Design should be intuitive and easy to follow. Messages must be sent to the appropriate channels, and due to this not all content is appropriate for a web page. Successful use of content depends on the media used to relay the content. Things like radio are more passive in nature, messages don’t need validating arguments with them. While other media may require much more critical evaluation to be successful. The level of complexity is important in media choice. Less complexity means it is okay to be brief, whereas something more complex will require some personal selling. This is important because knowing what makes media successful means you know where and how to send messages. Web page users are far more likely to critically evaluate something, but they don’t necessarily need personal selling. This means they lie more in the middle of the spectrum than the higher end.

Interactivity and Vividness

Interactivity addresses the usability of the page. Speed, range, and mapping will all be criteria for judging interactivity on a page. It is important that ease of navigation is met by keeping most of the content from being no more than three levels deep. It is important that Prospective Athletes don’t have to spend a lot of time to access recruiting channels. It is also important to see that various channels of communication are used effectively. High Interactivity also contributes towards Fan Development as increases in Interactivity result in increased feelings of telepresence.

Vividness can be defined as the use of tools such as audio, video, and animation. Increases in vividness are associated with a more positive and enduring attitude towards the website or brand. Due to this, this element is essential to Fan Development and can also strengthen Brand Identity. This phase will primarily consist of effective social media use, as identified by Clavio’s research. Utilizing media appropriately contributes to higher perceptions of vividness and enhances user engagement and
gratification. This is important as there is a strong correlation between media use and attendance. The Athletics Facebook page should have the most depth of any form of social media, allowing for interaction or accessing more in-depth information. Some of the preferred utilizations of the platform identified in the study were seeing upcoming events, reading stories about games, watching live casts, and participating in contests. Twitter should be used for shorter updates and more easily consumable information. The highest rated utilization of twitter was seeing upcoming events. While reading stories on the game and reading about the players and coaches scored highly as well. Research noted that fans heavily utilize the “retweet” feature on Twitter. The webpage should be able to unify all social media efforts, such that fans can easily access the content they are looking for, at the level they are looking for.

Graphics and Distinctiveness

Graphics can often impact functionality and navigation of a page. Graphics are directly tied to illustrating, in some manner or fashion, Brand Image. When considering graphics, one should ensure that they are not overly busy or artsy, as that tends to detract from the perception of a page. Graphics that are overly busy can also inhibit a user’s navigability and the page’s load time. The best use of graphics on a University webpage are Environmental graphics. Environmental graphics aid in both Brand Image and Fan Development, as it gives users a visual impression of what to expect. If done well, it can communicate a message that the brand is wanting to put forward and can inform/reinforce users on what to expect when attending an event.

It is important that there is a distinctive aesthetic to the page that is consistent with the appropriate Brand Image. Doing this effectively will help make a page feel unique from a similar University Athletics page with all the same features. This is the element that ties all previous elements together in a consistent and cohesive nature. The judgement of this element is more subjective than objective but is an important piece of the Framework nonetheless.

Attention Model

The attention model of the framework serves as a self-check for the implementation of the other two phases. This phase will illustrate the focus and effectiveness of the page. If you are using this model to evaluate, you will be able to see where on the page a user will most likely be focused on. This will also allow you to know whether or not the page supports both goal-oriented and exploratory users. If you are using this phase to design, you will be able to know how to go about emphasizing different aspects to better suit your target audience. This will also allow you to build a page that is effective for both types of identified users as well. This
phase uses size, position, contrast, and color use as criteria. Size is simply that larger objects will be more noticeable. When positioning modules on a page, it is important to remember that human attention is usually drawn to the middle of the page. The use of contrast can help direct attention, as well, as make objects easily distinguishable from the background. Finally, color refers to ensuring that conflicting color schemes are not used. This model focuses on visibility, which if used properly could satisfy both types of users. Visibility is defined as the degree to which a piece of information on a web page is able to draw user attention before other information. This means that a page should be divided into conceptually coherent chunks, the organization of which, should be derived from a hierarchy built from the Attention Model.

Framework Application: Analysis

Colorado State University – Pueblo Page Analysis

The CSU – Pueblo Athletics page did well when ran through the framework for evaluation, however, plenty problem areas were identified. The CSU – Pueblo page scored in the “moderately effective” category with a total score of 13. For the first phase of the Framework they scored a five. Content was all there, though there was some room for improvement where the content segmentation is concerned. For this reason, it scored a two in this category. Interactivity was also scored at a two. The page was very navigable but had its issues. The improvement of transitioning between pages and hoverable links are two major fixes for a lot of these issues. For graphics they only scored a one, as graphics were a little overdone on this page. For the second phase of the framework they scored a six. In the first category of phase 2 they scored a two. The fan hub could be improved upon, as well as, the media center module. The ticker on the page should have featured different content than what it did, the ticker was underutilized as it stands. For the second category they also scored a two. The background image caused the page to be a bit too overwhelming, and they could stand to use a few more photos and videos on the page. For the third category, distinctiveness, they scored a two. The branding on the page was strong, but its implementation into design wasn’t all too desirable. For the final phase of the framework they scored a two. While they used size and positioning well, they could have used contrast better to better emphasize content modules.
Competitor Analysis

University Colorado Colorado Springs

The University Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS) scored in the “excellent” category with a score of 19. For the first phase UCCS scored eight points. For content they scored a two, they had the full set of features and good segmentation. However, there was no prominent prospects link. For interactivity they scored a three. They were very navigable, used a live ticker, and had some smart content placement. For graphics they scored a three as well. They used a high level of graphics, but they were used smartly such that they weren’t overwhelming. There was a lot of Environmental graphics used on the page as well. For Phase 2 of the Framework they scored an eight again. For content focus they scored a 2. They integrated media well, but it could use a few tweaks. For vividness they scored a three, had a very intuitive design. For distinctiveness they scored a three as well. There was a very strong brand image relay. Finally, for Phase 3 they scored a three, using the attention model very well.

University of Northern Colorado

The University of Northern Colorado (UNC) landed in the moderate category with a score of 12. For the first phase of the Framework UNC scored four points. For content they scored only one, as they lacked some common features. There was no prevalent schedules or upcoming events, and no Athlete of the Week section. Segmentation was a bit odd as well. For interactivity they only scored one as well, there was a very minimal top layer of navigation. Awkward content placements also hurt the page’s navigability as well. For graphics they scored a two. For Phase 2 of the Framework they scored a five. For content they scored only one point. Media was poorly implemented into the page, blocks of media were inappropriately packed into the same modules. For Vividness they scored only a one. While many of the elements were present on the page, they were integrated into the page poorly. Finally, for Distinctiveness they scored a three. Branding was very strong on the page. There was a consistent use of colors, logos, and texts. Overall it was a very distinct page. For the third phase they scored a three as well. They used the attention model well, and largely focused on their news, Facebook, and their online shop.

University of Washington

The University of Washington landed in the poor category with a score of 9. During Phase 1 of the Framework Washington scored four points. The first phase, content characteristics, they scored a two. While everything was there content wise, segmentation on the webpage was too broad. They scored only ones on Interactivity and Distinctiveness. For interactivity, some placements made
navigating the page potentially confusing. For Distinctiveness, the page was very minimalist in design, but looked less clean than most minimalist sites. For Phase 2 they scored three they only scored a single point in each category. For content features, there was very poor social media utilization on the page. For vividness, there was very poor organization in photos and videos. Since there was no media hub, it made the use of photos and videos seem forced. For Graphics, they were focused too heavily on photos and videos and didn’t include any environmental background graphics. For the last phase they scored a two. They used the attention model well but focused a bit too heavily on promotions. This made the site feel more geared for the community than for the students.

Survey

Purpose

The purpose of the survey is to serve as a means to help in building a hierarchy when using the Attention Model from prior research. This survey will also help in identifying any problem areas that may have been missed in analysis. The survey includes three sections. The first is comprised of consent documentation, the second is the survey itself, and the third is comprised of demographics questions. The actual survey is comprised of nine closed questions and two open questions. Questions include: “What existing feature(s) need improvement?”, “What is the most important feature of the Athletics web page?”, and “How do you typically visit the Athletics web page?”. The questions address things like ease of navigation, overall satisfaction, and frequency of use. Surveys were made, administered, and compiled through Google Docs. Links to the survey were provided via fliers around campus, email, and social media.

Results

The survey was distributed for nine days, during this time thirty participants took the survey. Of those 76.7% identified as female, 86.7% were 18-24 years of age, and 93.3% were CSU-Pueblo students (23.3% being student athletes). Survey results showed low involvement as 66.7% of respondents reported not regularly visiting the webpage, and 23.3% reported only visiting the page about once a month. The features ranked most important features on the Athletics page were the schedule (57.1%), live sports (14.3%), and promotions (14.3%). Features identified for potential improvement were live sports, sports news, and schedule at 37.5%, 33.3%, and 25% respectively. On a scale of 1 to 5, most participants rated social media utilization and overall satisfaction both at a 3 rating. 44.8% of participants reported visiting the page primarily by laptop, 31% visited by mobile, and 24.1% reported
that they do not visit the page at all. The survey had a mixed response regarding the speed and ease of navigating the page. Participants typically spent around the expected amount of time to find content, however, 40.7% reported it taking more time than expected. Between the two open questions at the end of the survey, participants gave many suggestions for improvement. Updating pictures and bios more frequently, mobile navigability, and simplified online ticket purchasing were all notable mentions.

Implications

The survey implies the general need for improvement upon the existing athletics page. This finding supports the one found by running the athletics page through the Framework. The survey found that 2/3rd of the survey respondents did not regularly visit the page, this implies that the existing page is underutilized. The four features identified as the most important features of the site, were all also identified to be in need of improvement by the majority of respondents. A majority of respondents rated media utilization and overall satisfaction both at a three rating. These results also match the indications found in the results of the content focus category analysis of the Framework. Navigability of the page was rated at a three by the majority of the audience, supporting the results of the Interactivity and Content Characteristics categories of the Framework. Apart from the survey results supporting the findings of the Framework evaluation, this survey also provides some direct target audience input on improvements for the page. Improvements in live sports streaming and buying tickets online were suggested by participant. As well as, updating pictures and biographies of the Athletes on various sports rosters. There were also several suggestions about improving awareness through the page, one respondent suggested focusing more on teams that are doing well specifically. Each of these suggestions are valuable in addressing the issues found with the CSU-Pueblo Athletics page and can be effectively implemented into a redesign of the page through the Framework.

Framework Application: Redesign

We will use the build model of the Framework to apply the evaluation and survey conducted prior into a redesign for the CSU – Pueblo Athletics page. The first step of the build model is content. The links at the top of the page need to be consolidated from 11 links to just 5. This segmentation improves navigability and speed in finding content, as well as, making the page look cleaner as well. The content could also be improved by adjusting the center module at the top of the page. It acts as a media center for the homepage, however, it needs a lot of improvement. While there is a tab for the news, it is hard to navigate through the stories. Adjusting the size and functionality of the slider on the side of the
module could alleviate this problem. There is also a social media tab, but it doesn’t appear quite finished. The Facebook feed doesn’t fill its assigned module properly to very noticeable effect. Twitter isn’t featured in this tab but it should be. Twitter is instead used as the ticker at the bottom of the page, and frequently doesn’t even display tweets properly. The ticker should instead display a schedule of upcoming games. The schedule was rated as highly important but is located near the bottom of the page, putting this in the ticker would allow users to see and interact with it immediately upon visiting. This would also free up the space that the schedule once was on the page for a new piece of content that should be added to the page. One suggestion from the survey was to raise awareness of what teams were doing well. Next to the “Athlete of the Week” spotlight, there could be a “Team of the Week” spotlight. This would highlight whichever team was doing well that past week. Making these improvements to the content would greatly improve the overall effectiveness of the page and make significant gains in meeting the needs of the target audience.

The second step of the build model is Interactivity. While the page is fairly navigable, there are a few edits that would go a long way in improving upon the page. The first is the use of Breadcrumb Navigation, which would allow for better navigability when switching between pages. Another fix would be having the drop-down menus at the top of the page be hover-able when browsing by computer. This would improve ease of navigation considerably. Lastly, improving the menu sliders on the modules (as mentioned earlier). The third step of the build model is Vividness. This section of the redesign is fairly simple, as the current page does do quite well. First, the background image is too overwhelming. The background needs to be semi-transparent, such that it retains the energy of the Brand Image but doesn’t overwhelm the page. Or the background needs to be changed, favoring a style used by the UCCS Athletics web page instead. Second, the “photo” tab in the center module is dead, meaning it doesn’t work. The fourth step of the build model is Graphics and Distinctiveness. As mentioned earlier, a change in the background would help tremendously in this section. Other than that, the modules could be improved upon aesthetically. The final step of the build model is the use of the Attention Model. Moving the schedule to the ticker and improving the “news” section of the center module are necessary fixes. Again, the changing the background is also a necessary fix, as it was one of the only reasons this page didn’t score a 3 in the Attention Model.

These were all the fixes identified by the Framework. These suggestions for redesign are all based off the build model of the Framework with the survey and evaluation data used as a reference for
the build. With these fixes in place, the CSU-Pueblo Athletics page should be effective from both a marketing and design standpoint.

Conclusion

Limitations

There were a variety of limitations that this thesis project had. First there was a very limited number of sources for secondary research, however, the research found was very comprehensive. Another limitation that this thesis had was regarding the overall survey validity. This was due to the sample size and reach of the survey. The survey had only 30 participants and may not have accurately represented the whole target audience for the CSU – Pueblo Athletics page. Another area where the thesis could be improved upon would be having a focus group to conclude the project. This focus group could have tested the effectiveness of the build model of the Framework. However, this was an idea that was formulated a bit too late in the project to implement it. While there were likely more limitations that this thesis saw, these were the major limitations and criticisms of the thesis.

Findings

This thesis provides a strong starting point for this type of marketing research. No other comparable models were found for Athletics pages, making this Framework a pioneering research effort. The Framework is designed to meet both sports marketing and web design goals in a consistent and effective manner. This Framework is also very versatile as it can be used to evaluate or design an Athletics page. The evaluation piece of the Framework seems to be in a very strong state, as evaluations can be performed quite quickly through the Framework. Many of the findings of the evaluation were also backed by survey results as well. The Framework is backed by extensive research and fulfills the overall goal of systematically achieving an effective Athletics page as well. While this model is built specifically with Athletics pages in mind, it could likely be modified quite easily to apply to other types of web pages. Overall the existing Framework is very promising.
References


